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Special Issue
The Role of Norms
in Virtual Work

Guest Editors
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Editorial

The Role of Norms in Virtual Work
A Review and Agenda for Future Research

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Today, almost all work-related interactions and communications are at least partially supported by electronic media and thus "virtual" to some degree. Not only are organizations increasingly relying on geographically distributed teams to conduct their core work tasks (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002), but even co-located teams tend to do increasingly large portions of their work using various IT technologies, such as shared databases, intranet, wikis, and email, and thus are to different degrees virtual teams as well. Thus, although virtual work often involves geographical dispersion it is not a prerequisite for virtuality (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). There is already a substantial body of research on the effects of virtual versus face-to-face collaboration which has found that virtual interactions generally provide fewer social cues than co-located interactions (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and that remote team members tend to know less about the context in which distant colleagues work (Cramton, 2001). This research suggests that the social processes that groups rely on to coordinate their activities and develop their relationships become harder to correctly perceive, infer, and apply in virtual environments. One of the key processes regulating cooperation and communication in work groups are social norms. Although existing literature points to the importance of developing shared norms in virtual work and there is some work on norms within online communities (e.g., Blanchard, 2008; Burnett & Bonnici, 2003), there is little research focusing specifically on how different types of norms operate within virtual work environments. Because differences in expectations across locations can result in increased conflict and reduced motivation and can hamper cooperation and performance within virtual environments (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007; Hinds & Bailey, 2003), we chose to address this gap in current research and to edit a special issue on the topic.

Norms and De-Individuation in a Lean(er) Virtual Environment

In the past, two major features have been identified as being characteristic of virtual collaborative environments: Firstly, virtual environments are seen as relatively lean compared to face-to-face interactions and lack the ability to carry social, nonverbal, and feedback cues which limits their suitability for complex tasks involving ambiguity and uncertainty (Daft & Lengel, 1986). However, early on there has also been some criticism which has questioned the supposed leanness of virtual media (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Culnan & Markus, 1987; Markus, 1994; Walther, 1996), arguing that cues are available via such media, albeit not in the same way as in face-to-face interactions. Social and nonverbal cues in virtual environments can achieve greater "richness," especially with time and experience, and when relations are better formed.

Secondly, the increased anonymity can lead to a process of de-individuation (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) resulting in less awareness of the impact of one's own behavior as well as the reactions of others, and possibly less inhibition and as a consequence anti-normative behavior, reduced politeness, and even increased aggression. The Social Identity and De-Individuation Effects model specifies how de-individuation in computer-mediated communication relates to group identity and different social norms for in-groups and out-groups (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Watt, 2001). In a leaner virtual environment with little information about individual group members, deviance from group norms is likely to be more salient (Lea & Spears, 1992) and norm violations can have a negative impact, because attributions to negative personal characteristics such as incompetence,

laziness, etc., are more likely (Cramton, 2001). Transgressions by out-group members may be seen more negatively (out-group bias), whereas those by in-group members might be overlooked and explained away (in-group favouritism; Lea & Spears, 1992). There is also some evidence that norm violations by in-group members might be perceived more negatively, as they should know better (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001).

Current Research on Norms in Virtual Collaboration

Although recent research in the virtual work literature has often focused on the need for explicit norms or "rules" of conduct and communication, not many studies have actually tested this empirically. A small number of studies investigate implicit or emergent social norms and the transition from implicit to explicit norms. However, a notable aspect of current research is that most studies do not explicitly use a norms approach to understand how rules for appropriate conduct function within a virtual environment.

Setting Norms for Virtual Communication

There is some evidence from prior research that by setting explicit rules, uncertainty and ambiguity in virtual collaboration can be reduced and in turn have a positive effect on social processes in virtual groups such as increased trust and shared goals. For instance, Walther and Bunz (2005) found that having a set of explicit rules for collaboration (e.g., communicate frequently, always acknowledge messages) laid out at the very start can enhance trust in virtual student groups. Such rules reduce uncertainty and provide shared expectations, and in turn can enhance trust (Gallivan, 2001). Although not discussed under the aspect of norms, defining explicit rules of conduct is a process of norm setting, and communicating expected outcomes. While some research has considered the impact of these rules or norms on trust, little is known about how trust might impact on the development of these norms in the first place.

Somewhat more related to norms of appropriateness is research on how giving feedback over email is perceived. For instance, an experimental study by Kurtzberg, Belkin, and Naquin (2006) found that feedback mixing both positive and negative components was perceived more negatively if it was sent by email rather than given face to face. Because email is often considered an informal method of communication, this may not be seen as appropriate for feedback (and thus violating a shared social norm). However, other research suggests that email can be perceived as an important and useful means of delivering feedback (Balsor & Weatherbee, 2010).

A related process to setting rules is the phenomenon of implicit norms becoming explicit in virtual contexts. For instance, a qualitative study (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003) found that implicit norms (use of self-deprecating humor; language and style used in posts) in online Usenet groups often became explicit over time, because norm violations would instigate discussions about acceptable behavior, and that once the group members were in agreement, these norms tended to be turned into explicit norms and rules of conduct. Other research has shown how emergent social norms can enhance other social processes in virtual groups, such as explicit goal setting by group incentives. For instance, positive emergent norms for knowledge sharing in an interactive management decision-making simulation enhanced the impact of formal group incentives for knowledge sharing (Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007). Thus, research so far suggests that having explicit, shared norms of behavior in virtual work is important for a range of collaborative outcomes.

Cultural and Situational Influences on Norms

Another important aspect of norms is their dependence on situational influences, which is evidenced in studies suggesting that norms of virtual communication vary depending on the situation and the status associated with group membership. For instance, norms of email etiquette and formality vary for individuals and groups as well as across different organizations and cultures (Vignovic & Thompson, 2010). Postmes et al. (2000) found that emails were more formal when sent to higher status individuals. In another study, instructors receiving an overly casual message from a student felt less positive affect and liking for that student, and were less likely to comply with the student's requests (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009).

Location is a further aspect in distributed virtual work that has potentially important implications for norm formation and setting as it creates very different situational contexts for each location. For instance, in a team that is split across different locations, then location itself might be used as a basis for self-categorization and subgroup formation. Thus, geographical location can create group "fault-lines" between different parts of the team. This effect can be exacerbated if the team is divided into subgroups of co-located members which are each homogenous in nationality (Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, & Kim, 2006). Moreover, uneven distribution of team members across sites can lead to a competitive coalition mentality (O'Leary & Mortensen, 2010). Although these processes have strong implications for norm development and violation, the relationship between norms and fault-lines has so far been neglected in the literature.

Norms can vary not only depending on the situation but also depending on the cultural background of cooperation partners, which is an increasingly important aspect of work in general as well as in virtual collaborations. Teams and organizations operate more and more often in a globalized work context which includes going across organizational, national, and cultural boundaries. Electronic media facilitate this development by supporting distributed work regardless of location, time zone, cultural background, and organizational affiliation.

Norms are expressions of shared values and beliefs in a specific culture and consequently shape attitudes, behaviors, and expectations of what is appropriate in a given situation within a specific cultural context. These differences across cultures are likely to be highly important in virtual work and might lead to incompatibilities within multicultural virtual teams. For instance, rewards based on an individual hero ethos might fit well with the culture and norms of the US but not with those of Japan (Armstrong & Cole, 2002). However, only recently have scholars started to examine or theorize about the interaction between culture and virtuality, and to date most of the focus has been on communication, temporal coordination, and conflict (Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007). There has been no or little consideration of the interaction between norms and cultural background in virtual work.

Contributions in This Issue

The contributions within this issue try to address some of the gaps identified above relating to the contextual influences of norms and the processes by which norms influence trust and group outcomes. Three key themes are identified: one relating the impact of norms to the degree of virtuality/configuration of the team, two papers looking at the cultural influences and their relation to norm perception, and another one relating the building of trust to the processes of norm formation, specifically the reciprocal impact of trust in norm development over time.

Degrees of Virtuality and Team Configuration

An important aspect of virtual work environments is the different degrees of virtuality and the configuration of the team (e.g., with some members co-located and others dispersed) which will mean members have to switch between virtual and face-to-face collaboration. This might result in incongruent norms being developed in the different subgroups. For instance, people who are co-located might have different norms for communication via electronic media than those who are dispersed. Due to less reliance on communication technologies, the email communication of those who are co-located might be less detailed and more casual than the email communication of those who are working remotely. Co-located environments are characterized by informal, immediate verbal communication with the benefit of nonverbal cues (and thus co-located team members may be less mindful of writing emails that convey contextual, relational, and social information), whereas virtual environments need to have more deliberate, explicit, and more disciplined communication norms and should also convey contextual, relational, and social information in addition to core messages. Moving between virtual and face-to-face environments might thus be a particular challenge as Cheshin, Kim, Bos, Nan, and Olson (2013) show in their two experimental studies. They found that hybrid or par-

tially co-located teams did indeed develop distinct communication norms and that co-located groups often had difficulties when communicating with remote members as they had to switch from lean messaging (within the co-located group) to greater cognitive effort and elaboration of messages (for remotes). Most of the norms regarding use of electronic communication persisted even when the media environment was changed. This difference in electronic communication norms might serve as an additional fault-line, causing an additional rift within distributed teams and impact on team communication and performance if the processes are not carefully and explicitly managed.

Cultural Influences on Norms and Norm Perception

As mentioned above, the influence of culture on norms within virtual work is likely to be particularly important given the global nature of many organizations. For instance, within a multicultural context there is likely to be an expectation for behavior that is interculturally acceptable with norms regulating the perceived appropriateness of the respective attitudes, expectations, and behaviors. Because of this importance, two contributions in this special issue specifically study different aspects of norms in an intercultural virtual work context.

Emotions play an important motivational role in organizations and teams, and norms regarding the appropriateness of emotion display vary greatly in different cultures as research in traditional teams has shown. Glikson and Erez (2013) extend prior research by studying the role of emotion display norms in virtual teams. In a virtual context, the expression of emotions is much more limited due to the leaner communication media and fewer social cues. In their study they had participants from five different countries rate the appropriateness for emotion display norms in a culturally homogenous versus a multicultural virtual work context. Their results showed that participants from all countries felt that suppression of negative emotions was more appropriate within a multicultural virtual team compared to when the team was culturally homogenous. Interestingly, national identity was significantly related to norm perception in homogenous teams but not in multicultural teams. Complementary to this finding, participants scoring high on global identity showed greater agreement regarding emotion display norms in multicultural teams than those scoring low on the global identity measure. The results indicate that people may activate different aspects of their social identity depending on work contexts (i.e., whether multicultural or culturally homogenous). Important practical implications are that work experience in multicultural contexts and a high sense of global identity may support shared emotion display norms and in turn might facilitate communication and the development of trust and team cohesion in multicultural virtual teams.

Krumm, Terwiel, and Hertel (2013) studied the processes of norm formation and adherence regarding intercultural competencies by comparing traditional with virtual teams. While four main competencies were distinguished (working

conscientiously, coping with stress and ambiguity, openness and perspective taking, and knowledge about other cultures), the only dimension that showed significant differences between traditional and virtual intercultural teams was "working conscientiously." They argue that forming explicit norms regarding observable actions like sticking to plans, adhering to deadlines, etc., is of much greater importance in an intercultural virtual environment than in a traditional one, because there are not only fewer cues, but there is also much less opportunity to develop shared norms by observing others in direct contact. They conclude that more explicit rules, higher work discipline, and a proactive attitude are required in intercultural virtual teams to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty and in order to develop the trust and cooperation needed to perform well and gain a comparable sense of cohesion to traditional intercultural teams. Important practical implications of these finding are that leaders of intercultural virtual teams should support the virtual collaboration by setting clear norms from the start, for example, regarding deadlines, but also by proactively implementing feedback cycles to further develop and reinforce the shared norms in culturally diverse virtual teams.

The Role of Trust in Norm Development

Norm-related cues might form the basis for trust in virtual teams. Indeed, Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013) make this argument in their longitudinal study on temporary global virtual teams and swift trust. They studied virtual teams with no face-to-face contact in a longitudinal and quasi-experimental design. Their results show that trust is not only the social "glue" in teams and mediates the relationship between early trusting beliefs and team performance, but that trust is also critical for the emergence and exertion of normative actions. Early trusting beliefs were found to work through normative actions, not in lieu of them. In ad hoc global virtual teams, high early trusting beliefs give members the necessary confidence to engage in normative actions, and these normative actions become a sustained basis of trusting beliefs and subsequent performance. It is the first time that these reciprocal relationships between trust, team performance, and norm setting and norm monitoring have been shown in a virtual team context. The findings are of high practical relevance for virtual teams where there is no time to build relationships through recurrent personal interactions. Swift trust is based on early assumptions of trustworthiness and can develop into longer term trust and benefit performance if those trusting beliefs are verified through normative actions such as scheduling, monitoring, and joint tasks.

An Agenda for Future Research

While research on norms in virtual work has been rather patchy and the empirical evidence and guiding theory have been limited to date, the papers in this special issue contribute to enhance our understanding of the impact that norms have on collaboration and performance in virtual

environments. Collectively these papers highlight the influence of different contexts on the types of norms that are developed, namely regarding the importance of multicultural work environments and partially distributed teams, which characterize many current work places. They also highlight the role that such norms play in enhancing trust and performance in virtual teams and how norms and trust influence each other reciprocally and develop over time. In doing so, the papers in this issue also have important practical implications for how norms can be influenced and managed in virtual work, for instance, by setting norms for communication and feedback early on in the team process or by enhancing a sense of global identity. However, there is still much left to learn and given that we are still in relative infancy regarding the study of norms in virtual collaboration we propose the following agenda for future research.

Beyond the De-Individuation Hypothesis

We need more theoretical development – specifically, theoretical approaches need to go beyond the de-individuation hypothesis. In real work environments, de-individuation is less likely to occur to the same degree because people tend to meet face to face occasionally, or at least have some cues about each other and thus know who they are dealing with. We would therefore expect that status differences and existing subgroup identities might be more important than de-individuation. Cheshin et al. (2013) have made a first contribution in this direction with their work on partially distributed teams. We would like to propose Group Fault-Line Theory (Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Polzer et al., 2006) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as promising approaches for looking specifically at norm violations to understand what is happening in virtual collaboration.

Degrees of Virtuality

Research about norms in virtual collaboration should consider different degrees of virtuality (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004) as well as possible interactions between meeting/working face to face and virtually. Krumm et al. (2013) and Cheshin et al. (2013) both contribute to our understanding of this, but we need more research also entailing other forms of virtual cooperation, which are not as lean as e-mail communications or instant messaging, for example Skype conferences which allow for visual cues, gesturing, etc., but are still not co-located.

Individual, Group, Organizational, Societal, and Cultural Levels of Norms

While the papers in this special issue have shed some light on the different levels at which norms emerge and are embedded, for instance, the influence of different cultural contexts (Glikson & Erez, 2013) and different locations in partially distributed teams (Cheshin et al., 2013) or the

influence on individual norm perception (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Krumm et al., 2013), we still need more research considering the different levels of norm formation and norm setting. Thus, we need more attention to personal, group, organizational, societal, and cultural level norms and also the interaction between those different levels. This is especially important in distributed work because virtual collaboration often occurs across organizational boundaries as well as across different cultures and countries. Electronic media facilitate cooperation regardless of location, time zones, organizational affiliation, and social and cultural background more than ever before. Everyone is – seemingly – only a click away and huge amounts of data and documents can be exchanged effortlessly. But despite the possible emergence of new global identities, people are still physical beings, always located in a specific place and time, with a history and rooted in a specific social and cultural background with its specific norms that govern their life. Therefore, greater understanding of the impact of different types of norms on different levels would help to shed light on the complexities of virtual work environments.

Linking Norms With Rewards and Goal Setting and The Underlying Psychological Processes

When goals and rewards are set in the work context, these are expressions of what an organization aspires to achieve and of the values and beliefs an organization holds and stands for. Reward management and goal setting are also key management techniques and an important – albeit usually not explicitly stated – way of setting norms employees are expected to follow. Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013) showed in their longitudinal study how trusting beliefs interact with norm setting and norm monitoring and consequently impact on performance. In doing so, the authors were able to tie goal setting with explicitly managing norms. Based on existing studies (Quigley et al., 2007), we propose that future studies should further pursue this topic by using and adapting theories of group cooperation, motivation, and goal setting, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999), the group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003), or the theory of planned behavior (Terry et al., 1999) to study norms in virtual work. While these theories all point out the importance of norms, they do not consider differences between virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face groups and have rarely been considered in research on virtual collaboration to date.

Potential Conflict and Blurring of Lines Between Private and Professional Norms

We know that technological developments (e.g., use of smartphones, email, wireless Internet access, working from home) have impacted greatly on expectations about availability, response time, etc., on work behavior and effectively led to the development of new (implicit) norms and also blurred the boundaries between work and private times and spaces. Yet to date, we know very little about how this switching between private and professional realms impacts on communication norms or how competing norms affect work outcomes. While the new technology might provide new forms of freedom by working (partially) remotely (for instance, regarding work schedules and combining family and work), there might also be substantial negative impacts (for example, on work-life-balance, well-being, and potential cognitive and social overload) from the constant switching and loss of clear boundaries between work and private life with their distinct sets of norms, demands, and separate times and spaces. While some research has looked at virtuality and the blurring boundaries between home and work (e.g., Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011), so far the impact of (potentially conflicting) norms and on norm development has not been explicitly considered.

Thus, in conclusion, we need to fundamentally rethink our conception of "virtual work" and understand the complexities of the phenomenon of "virtuality" in modern work practices if we aim to understand the underlying social and psychological processes that govern virtual social interactions, group work, and interorganizational cooperation. Social norms are certainly one of the key aspects in all forms of virtual collaboration, whether in co-located, partially distributed, or remote work environments, and they impact at all levels on perception, attitudes, and behavior: on the personal, team, organizational, societal, and cultural levels. We hope this special issue will help to inspire future research in this important area.

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